

# Common Threads: Local Strategies for "Inappropriated" Artists

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## A language of resistance and co-optation

Several contemporary artists maintain the critical feminist agenda of the 1970s. They refuse to buy into the present neo-conservatist backlash against the social advances that were made by that previous generation of artists. As support for this project of refusal, these artists have access to a cornucopia of feminist and postmodernist practices and theories that have been accumulating since the 1970s, when women in the visual arts challenged the art world's modernist canon. The cornucopia is concerned with representation and signification.

By introducing analyses of the social practices of production and consumption into art, feminist and other postmodernist practices inflicted the *coup de grâce* to the Greenbergian tenets of truth to the material and the universality of art reception (like no-iron polyester, these tenets guaranteed the self-sufficiency of visual and aesthetic experience). Predictably, provocatively, the antipathy between feminism and modernism suggested a paradigmatic shift. Many of those who advocated the shift were linked by a common set of methodological positions: validation of collaborative attitudes over individualistic

ones, careful attention to audience response, use of personal lives and daily activities as sites of political struggle, reappropriation of the body and the redefinition of power. Many artists and cultural critics began to work together toward a creative revision of the status quo.

At some moment during the challenge to modernism, several artists realized that textile practices are rich sites to explore and question the assumptions made about subjects like women's work, femininity and domesticity. The oppressive constraints of the textile tradition were recognized and new ways of negotiating meanings through textiles were sought.

Early feminist art that explored textile metaphors involved women like Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago in the United States and Joyce Wieland, Inese Birstins, Mary Scott, Barbara Todd, Ruth Scheuing, Lise Landry and Michelle Héon in Canada and Québec. These artists reappropriated a feminine language of exclusion, a process of reappropriation that has continued into the present decade with other artists: "Do I embellish or hide? Decorate or camouflage? Deflect or deceive?"... The voice of Linda Anderson-Stewart is pressing... "I have had an ongoing struggle with my father. His name is Art." (She also had an uncle named Art—he was a priest, a "father" of another kind.)

Anderson-Stewart's work explores and tries to understand the decorative as a secret code, as a means to hide content that is not acceptable to the dominant fiction. This revisionist history looks at women as if they were members of a secret society and tries to decipher the meaning behind the politics of their resistance. In other words, it is a rewriting of the histories of their oppression. It is important in future research to compare the decorative impulse of textile works with, for example, the politics of the gay camp style. In both cases, oppression assumes the appearance of leisurely activities that act as a form of resistance: womanliness as masquerade, as camouflage, as a way to protect oneself from the dominant order.

Anderson-Stewart's work also alludes to the history of attitudes in textiles—a mixed legacy that speaks an ambivalent language

of resistance and submission. Even today, textile practices remain a violent paradox. Skills associated with textiles are *still* employed in the educational contexts of home and school to inculcate the male ideal of femininity in women. Sewing skills are *still* a source of exploitation of middle and lower class women. In the home, sewing is regarded as a hobby, while in the factory, it is viewed as industrial production—both activities, however, speak of submission to patriarchal values.

Textile work associated with embroidery and tapestry often connotes gender submission and class privilege. It takes a wife a long time to weave an elaborate tapestry to decorate the walls of the family home; the tapestry becomes a visual reminder of her financial dependence on her husband. Like the generic public sculptures used by corporations to symbolize their special economic status, domestic textiles symbolize traditional, patriarchal family values. They symbolize a family's "happiness" and serve as proof of a wife's devotion to the family's comfort, not to mention a guarantee that she is using her leisurely hours in an *honest* way. This symbolical world evokes the male stereotype of the good mother as virgin rather than whore. Try to imagine a whore knitting while she waits for customers. Or the silent embroiderer—the stereotype of femininity *par excellence*—taking a break to masturbate. The conflation of textile practices with infantile female sexuality (read: innocent and submissive) is an extremely resistant male metaphor. Any display of sexuality by women is provocative. Good mothers do not have lovers; they have husbands. They do not, as whores do, express their love sexually; they display it through artifacts of comfort.

In women's novels the crucial interview between lovers is invariably marked by the moment when the woman drops her work—with her embroidery inevitably goes her self-containment and she surrenders to her lover.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of this loaded and complex history, when an artist uses textile skills (weaving, sewing, embroidering,

stitching) to negotiate the social constraints of women, the process of acquiring those skills is itself suspicious. This ambiguity often leads to dismissal, incomprehension or uncritical celebration of the artist's work. Granted, not all textile works are meant to be critical forms of resistance—some artists desire to achieve exactly what is expected of them by the status quo. But those artists who *do* transform textile processes and materials to produce meaning and provoke social discourse, deserve more than suspicion as a response. Their work should be attractive, if unusually challenging, to those in the art world who are committed to critical thought.

Ironically, when art criticism deals with media such as textiles, it is confronted by its own mixed legacy. It, too, has an uncomfortable language of resistance and submission. Like textiles, it oscillates between asocial formalist attitudes and renewed social interests. Consider the ease with which art criticism deals with the social content of contemporary practices like photography, video, film, installation and performance and the anxiety it reveals when it tries to deal with the social content of practices that were assigned lower class status by the modernist canon.

Resistance and submission; warp and weft. Before art criticism and textiles can weave their conceptual and historical threads together, they have to complete their examination of the effects of the guilt associated with their mixed legacies.

### **“Inappropriated” artists**

Textile practices have been treated with disregard for so long it is almost inconceivable for some critics and artists to acknowledge them as discursive formations from which meaning can emerge. Artists who use practices that are not well understood have the complex task of repossessing social space (both inside and outside the artwork) and revising the politics of that space. They also have to modify existing networks, or build new ones, to diffuse the strategies, histories,



ethics and artworks that arise from these processes of reappropriation and revision. However, there are traps. The passion for reform threatens to swallow some artists down an essentialist well. The fascination with deconstruction can seduce others to play out the same nostalgic themes—an endless recording of discontinuous variations. It is often along the edges of such traps that many artists struggle to represent the contradictions that continue to characterize textiles' relation to the dominant art fiction.

Artists who deal with these contradictions can be thought of as *inappropriated* artists.<sup>2</sup> Their historical position does not allow comfortable relations with the self (textile practices) or the other (dominant art fiction). To be an inappropriated artist is to be in critical relation with one's practice. The inappropriated artist is committed to *tension*—she does not want to embrace and reflect the values of a practice; she prefers to diffract and displace them. Inappropriated artists live in the border.

Fortunately, they have more and more company. In this world of dislocated origins, there is a growing collectivity: artists who construct their practices outside the canons of authenticity. For example, when I asked the artists I am about to present about the logic of their relationship to various practices, they said they did not feel obliged to confirm a place for textiles within existing art discourse. Rather, they want to subvert the politics of why and how (a) practice becomes a proper form of knowledge.

Between 1991 and 1992, Joan Caplan and Mary Lou Riordon-Sello collaborated on a two-part project called *Current Connection—On the Elbow River and Current Connection—At the Deane House*. Caplan and Riordon-Sello posted invitations in rural areas around Calgary; written in five different languages, the invitations asked women who had lived in the region since the 1920s to participate in a textile project. Several elderly women responded and, over a period of several months, they met in the lounge of an apartment building for seniors called Murdoch Manor. As they shared stories about their lives, new



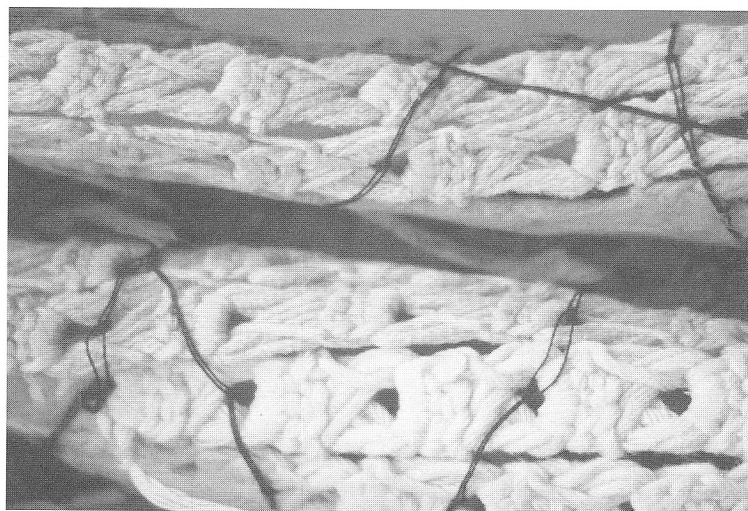
**Joan Caplan and Mary Lou Riordon-Sello**

*Current Connection at The Deane House, 1991-92.*

Photos: courtesy the artists.

Left: general view of the installation.

Right: detail of installation (crocheted flag).



versions of regional history emerged. At the same time, they were crocheting. Crocheting became a metaphor for the process of bringing to life women's history, a symbolic evocation of the collective efforts of women to build a regional community. They produced mountains of brightly-coloured crocheted strips.

The strips ended up on the banks of the Elbow River. Under the watchful eyes of the women, who were crocheting on-site what would be the last of the strips, Caplan and Riordon-Sello used domestic technology (clothesline pulleys and distaffs) to span the 175-foot width of Elbow River with no less than forty strips. The installation was strategically presented as a one-day celebration during the Fort Calgary Festival, a popular local event commemorating Calgary's history. At the end of the day, the crocheted strips were carefully retrieved for the second part of *Current Connection*.

The location for *Current Connection*—*At the Deane House* was an historical reconstruction of a Calgary courthouse, now a public site and tearoom. With a variety of traditional stitchery, the crocheted strips were assembled into the shape and size of flags. These crocheted flags were spotted around the courtroom, side by side with the official flags in situ—the juxtaposition became symbolic of a very different history. Video portraits of the elderly women recounting their lives also invaded the courtroom, occupying the benches normally set aside for the public. The electronic images of the women faced the judge's bench. On the wall above and behind the bench a framed chronology of women's slow progress toward legal rights was hung:<sup>3</sup>

These rooms were chosen because of their significance to women. The courtroom was the seat of judicial authority where, until recently, women were described as "reasonable persons" (previously, many legislators and judges viewed reasonable persons to be male).<sup>4</sup>

It is important to point out that most of the elderly women, who had been involved in *Current Connection* from the first

group meeting in Murdoch Manor, were present the night of the opening at the Deane House. Like their performative presence on the Elbow River, their presence at the opening was more than a celebration: the exchange of stories continued.

The women involved in *Current Connection (I & II)* transformed clichéd notions of women gossiping while they crochet. They successfully let people know that their collective effort was necessary and worthwhile in the rewriting of women's history. More modest in scale, *Current Connection (I & II)* is reminiscent of the spirit of Suzanne Lacy's *Crystal Quilt* project.<sup>5</sup> In both projects, the artists paid careful attention to the process of empowering older women, to the politics of rendering them visible social subjects and to the intense negotiations with local as well as historical authorities. These are elements of a discursive strategy that allows rich critical meaning to emerge from the lives of older women. For Joan Caplan and Mary Lou Riordon-Sello, the empowerment of local women is the warp of everyday life. Those who take the time to understand the meanings that emerge from *Current Connection (I & II)* empower themselves, too, providing the weft that is needed to complete this regional social fabric.

In *Remnants: A Videotext, Part 1* (1992), Karen Elizabeth McLaughlin reproduces a videotape and displays it as a continuous paper strip on a wall. The enlarged "videotape" (sixty-four feet long by fifteen inches deep) is divided into three tracks: video, audio-one and audio-two. The surfaces of all three tracks are scratched with words. The scratches in the video track tell the story of a woman named Choral who is the collective voice of McLaughlin's matrilineal history: her great-grandmother, grandmother, aunts, sister and mother. Made of red panels, the video track is disrupted by a series of green editing panels, as if Choral's story was the script for an actual video tape. The two audio tracks sit above the video track. Audio-one, written in the third person, functions as a conversational dialogue with Choral's narrative. Audio-two, made of colour photocopies of the Nova Scotia tartan, displays excerpts of the same narrative.

Like previous work by Karen Elizabeth McLaughlin, these three components are stitched together with a sewing machine. Sewing becomes a feminist metaphor for editing in which the subversive stitch can be viewed as a motif that disrupts, or as a motivation to disrupt. But is the narrative really disrupted by the sewing? Or does the sewing make the story visible? The subversive stitch provokes many questions: Is Choral's voice disrupted by the voices of her past? Or is her voice constituted by them? The reinvention of the voices of McLaughlin's past becomes the material that allows her to sew her own story, to make her own videotape: "Choral unfolds the remnants and stacks them in piles of Mama, Cora, Nanny, Elenor, Joyce and Eleanor Michelle."<sup>6</sup> What becomes explicit is *her* concern with the formations of identity through fantasy; *she* is Choral *and* the artist.

What is most certainly disrupted in *Remnants: A Videotext, Part 1* is certainty. Common sense usually prefers not to consider fantasy and its cousin, fiction, in the context of a social and political inscription. The transaction (sewing) between the three tracks becomes the "in between space" of another scene: a *mise-en-scène* of feminine desire. One reads in the sewing (this desire to transact) the story of a woman who seeks to change (re-edit) her (and our) attitudes to her (and our) familial reality. Her (our) only certainty is the instability of the feminine subject in her (our) matrilineal history:

Choral wants to remember the story Cora and Elenor always tell about the minister and the chickens in *Ecum Secum*. They always laugh so hard Cora pees. She doesn't think Joyce was there. All the laughing stories that could make you pee are with Cora and Elenor.<sup>7</sup>

McLaughlin has effectively deconstructed the dichotomy between the feminine fiction (the sewing and the writing) and familial reality (the videotape). The words scratched into the three tracks of the "videotape" acknowledge that there is no self-possessed lucidity in which the external world is simply

what it is. If the construction of the self as a social subject can parallel the construction of a videotape, both are mutable. Both are fictions to be constructed. McLaughlin/Choral is saying that the stories she has constructed from her memories may not be truthful, but they are still proper. Inaccurate yet necessary, necessary because inaccurate. Or, if McLaughlin/Choral was to paraphrase Roland Barthes, she would say, "I may know a photograph I remember better than a photograph I am looking at."

McLaughlin/Choral's storytelling is not a traditional narrative; lacking closure, it is constantly subject to rewriting. The members of her maternal family become privileged "families" of relational desires: desires that have a shape, desires that have a history. The Nova Scotia tartan, for example, is a mechanism of inscription that serves, not unlike a snapshot in a family album, to locate displaced desires. The tartan becomes a sophisticated device linking desires to a specific historical location. Meanwhile, the metaphoric representation of the "videotape" is a prop that stages itself as a scene. Just as the "videotape" stages its tracks, McLaughlin stages her selves through her fictive persona, Choral. Artist and videotape are a (in) *production*.

McLaughlin proposes a fiction where constant repositioning generates meaning. Like a Penelope without a Ulysses, McLaughlin/Choral weaves her life during the day and undoes (edits) it at night, not from fear of patriarchal reprimand but for the pleasure of trying out different patterns. Indeed, what better to do with all this matrilineal life footage than to sew it again and again, the next sewn narrative always just as intriguing as the others.

In the middle of a room, on a table, sits a large bowl of pungent peeled apples.<sup>8</sup> They are slowly browning. They are welcoming. On an adjacent wall, neat rows of preserves sit quietly on beautiful wooden shelves. Voices come from the far corner of the room, out of a video monitor. On the monitor's screen, a group of women are talking and peeling apples around a kitchen table. *i live there above a storage area of*

*canned goods... shelves filled with glass mason jars... enough to feed everything... excess... canned... put away... suspended... arrested... preserved for posterity.* A banal activity like peeling apples can be a metaphor for the process of constructing social meaning. Peeling and canning, like embroidering, sewing and crocheting, can be subverted. Transformed, they become discursive rather than submissive practices. *pears are dropped into an acidic solution to prevent darkening... hand-placed into the glass jars to be attractive... visually pleasing... not dark not me.* Women who are caught up in and formed by domestic practices have the power and the responsibility to construct new social selves. You know the faces; they are familiar. *on the periphery i rationalize my exclusion with my unacceptability.*

#### NOTES

1. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1989) p. 166.

2. Minh-ha T. Trinh, "She, The Inappropriate/d Other," *Discourse*, (no. 8, Winter 1986-87).

3. For example, the Alberta Legislature only extended the right to vote to women in 1916.

4. From the didactic texts for *Current Connection—At the Deane House* (1992).

5. *The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies*, MIT Press (vol. 32 no.1, Spring 1988).

6. From Choral's narrative in *Remnants: A Videotext, Part 1*, Muttart Art Gallery (Calgary, 1992).

7. *Ibid.*

8. The last paragraph is a description of an installation by Marilyn Love (Virginia Christopher Gallery, 1991). The italicized text is also by the artist.